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Between Image and Spectator: Reception Studies as Visual Methodology

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Abstract

This article makes the case for reception studies as a useful tool in the visual analysis of fashion photography. While there has been increased attention paid to methodology in the field of Fashion Studies of late, the study of audience reception – that is, the way viewers make sense of images – remains underdeveloped. This article lays down an experimental methodology for reception studies of fashion media, using the focus group format as sociological method and “discursive performativity” as theoretical framework. I present a critical appraisal of this method, drawing upon the findings of my research on the “woman-child” in European fashion magazines, from 1990-2015. In so doing, I engage with debates on the “female gaze”, the active audience, polysemy and the “effects” of fashion magazines.

Keywords: Reception studies, audience studies, spectatorship, the female gaze, childlike femininity, fashion photography

In 1968 Roland Barthes famously declared “The Death of the Author”. Intended as a polemic against Auteur Theory,¹ the essay underlined the active role played by the reader in processes of meaning-making. “A text’s unity”, he argued, “lies not in its origin but in its destination” (1977a [1968]: 148). Of course, Barthes overstated his claim when he declared the author’s intended meaning to be irrelevant but his essay nevertheless opened up the idea that readers might not draw meaning from texts in a uniform manner. Texts might be polysemic, open to more than one possible interpretation. This has implications for the study of images: for how can one be sure that the researcher’s reading is the “right” one? Or put differently, recognising images as polysemic might mean dispensing with the idea of a “right” reading altogether.

Barthes was writing about literature, but his notion extends equally to other forms of cultural

production, including the fashion media. In fact, the reader's interpretation of fashion writing was something Barthes himself considered in his lengthy semiotic study, *The Fashion System* (1990 [1967]). There he suggested that "the reading of Fashion utterances (in their rhetorical form) could be verified by submitting women who read them to non-directive interviews" (233).² Such interviews would serve to challenge or reinforce the semiotic analysis of the researcher. Barthes was writing in 1967, yet there remain few instances where reception studies have been put into practice in the field of Fashion Studies – despite increased attention being paid to methodologies in recent years.³ The present article begins to address that gap, by presenting an experimental methodology for the reception study of fashion photography – both advertising and editorial. The discussion is based on the reception studies I carried out as part of my doctoral research on the "woman-child" in fashion photography, from 1990-2015 (focusing mostly on British fashion magazines). Although I will touch upon the different meanings of childlike femininities, as articulated by my participants, the main focus of this article will be on the reception study method itself.

In the first part of the article I lay down the rationale for reception studies of fashion photography, based on the principles of polysemy and the active audience. I point to the value of this method for studies of gender in particular, with reference to the changing meanings of childlike femininity across time and place. I then note the fallacy of the "female gaze", arguing that women do not look in a uniform manner; instead, the female gaze is multifarious. In the second part of this article, I explore the focus group method as a means of carrying out reception studies. As well as outlining the "nuts and bolts" of this approach, I also introduce the concept of discourse as a means of linking participants' words to the images before them. I introduce a visual example of 'Kinderwhore' from *i-D* magazine to illustrate how different women might read the same image in starkly different ways. Excerpts drawn from transcripts show how participants' words can breathe life into fashion imagery, connecting it to personal feelings, perceptions and experiences. Finally, I present a critical appraisal of the reception study method, followed by discussion of the need to "reign in" polysemy to avoid the charge of relativism.

The Image: Three Sites of Meaning

Images have three sites at which meaning might be studied: the site of production, the image itself, and the site of reception.⁴ The sites of production and reception can be studied through sociological methods

(interviewing producers and readers) whereas the image itself requires a different (semiotic) approach, being “an object endowed with a structural anatomy” (Barthes 1977b [1961]: 15). The “structural anatomy”, to which Barthes refers, is the formal structures of the image: its composition, mise en scène, and the addition of written text to “anchor” visual meaning. These formal structures might, in turn, lead the reader to other texts in the cultural landscape by virtue of intertextuality: the way fashion images “appear to evoke or quote evoke or quote other media – be they works of literature, advertisements, films, or pop videos” (Jobling 1999: 6). Scholarship on fashion photography has tended to study the formal structures of the image, through the method of textual analysis, rooted in a range of traditions: semiotics (Barnard 2002); discourse⁵ (Jobling 1999; Rocamora 2009); and psychoanalysis (Bancroft 2012). Less common are ethnographic studies of fashion media that focus on the site of production⁶ and/or reception, although a small body of work has begun to emerge.⁷

James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein (2001) define *Reception study* as an examination of the ways in which “texts are constructed in the process of being received” (xiii) or “the socio-historical context of interpretative practice” (xii). The emphasis on engagement with social subjects means that reception studies can be pitted against “the purely formal approach” (xiii); that is, approaches employing textual analysis, only. Although I use the term “reception studies” in this article, the project might equally be located within the “new audience research”: concerned with the “interpretations, use and experience” of media audiences (van Zoonen 1994: 106). The distinction between the study of “audience” and the study of “reception” is somewhat unclear, as noted by Machor and Goldstein (2001: 203-9). I have opted for the term “reception” rather than “audience” in this article, because I was not necessarily interested in the *intended* audience of fashion magazines but rather in the way women, more generally, interpreted the “woman-child” at the point of reception. My decision to show images to both readers and non-readers of fashion magazines was informed by my overarching research questions, namely: the different meanings of the “woman-child” and the possible appeal of the “woman-child” to contemporary women (as further discussed below). Furthermore, in some instances the imagery I was investigating extended beyond the pages of fashion magazines, as in the case of Marc Jacobs’ *Oh, Lola!* (2011, Figure 1), which appeared on department store signage as well as the free *ES Magazine* in London, prior to being prohibited from reappearing in its current form by the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA 2011).



Figure 1 Marc Jacobs, *Oh, Lola!* 2011. Photographer: Juergen Teller. Model: Dakota Fanning. Published in British *Vogue*, September 2011: 245.

Existing scholarship on “audience” is largely located within the field of Media Studies, and has tended to focus on the genre of television (Ang 1996 [1982]; Morley 1980; Skeggs et al. 2008). This approach to studying television has been recuperated and channelled into the genre itself, with Channel 4’s *Gogglebox* being a particularly salient example.⁸ By contrast, still media imagery has received less attention in the Academy (although see Benwell 2008; Crane 2000; Malson et al. 2011). A body of

scholarship on reception also exists in the fields of Art History (Baxandall 1985; Butler 2016; Walker 1991), English literature (Modleski 1984; Radway 1992) and Film Studies (Staiger 1992), with Machor and Goldstein's edited volume *Reception Study* (2001) presenting essays from a range of disciplines, including Cultural Studies.⁹

When it comes to the field of Fashion Studies, studies of reception are few. One example consists in the work of Diana Crane (2000), who carried out reception studies¹⁰ as part of her study on clothing, class and gender identity in the West. Crane showed fashion photographs and clothing advertisements to participants in focus groups in order to explore the extent to which “women identify with images that represent contemporary fashion's conflicting hegemonic ideals for women's appearance” (21). Other studies on the reception of media images and gender, more generally, include that of Helen Malson et al. (2011) on “postfeminist” media advertising¹¹ and Bethan Benwell's (2008) study of reader responses to irony in men's magazines. The work of Peter Jackson et al. (2001) on men's magazines is particularly noteworthy in that it explores all three sites of meaning-making, through interviews with editors alongside audience studies. Studying the reception of still fashion images can be considered related to, but distinct from, ethnographies of magazine-reading practices as a whole (such as Hermes 1995). That said, this distinction is an analytical one only, in that these endeavours are clearly related; consuming imagery is one element in the broader practice of reading magazines.

This attention to audience interpretation marks a shift away from the “hypodermic needle” model of media effects, associated with communication studies in the 1940s and 1950s (Gill 2007: 17). If fashion images are deemed polysemic, it follows that more attention needs to be paid to the way fashion images are made sense of at the point of reception and, in turn, the role they might play in identity formation. For, as Angela McRobbie (2009) argues,

The fashion image is constantly blamed for encouraging eating disorders among young women. And yet neither inside the academy, nor in the world of public debate and policy, has there been a sustained discussion about the cultural significance of these images in the lives of young women (98-9).¹²

Reception studies therefore hold great potential for better understanding the relationship between individuals in the social world and the way they confront gender representations as offered up in the fashion media. Furthermore, they provide the opportunity to actually “test out” theories on spectatorship, such as the oft-discussed “male gaze” (Mulvey 1991). In my case, I was interested in the way women

made sense of childlike femininities in fashion magazines: Why was this imagery so prevalent after several waves of feminism? What was its appeal to contemporary women? In order to fully explain the value of reception studies to this project, it is worth first of all noting the complex textual history that informs childlike constructions of femininity in the present.

The “Woman-child” in Fashion Photography

The childlike character of ideal femininities has long been critiqued by feminists in the West. Mary Wollstonecraft, in the eighteenth century, suggested woman was seen as the “toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 45). Much later, Simone de Beauvoir (1970 [1949]) argued that woman was seen as the “eternal child”: passive, inferior, and deferent to men, with little influence on the world beyond the domestic sphere. Positioning women as childlike served to cement inequalities between the sexes; women were, in effect, honorary children – and as such not fully adult – making it easy to justify their differential treatment (Oakley 1994). Feminists have therefore fought to end the infantilization of women, calling for equal access to education and equal – adult – standing for women alongside men.

Yet, in spite of the gains of feminism, or perhaps in tandem with them, women have continued to be represented as childlike in the fashion media, and beyond. In fact, my research found there to be a sharp increase in images of the “woman-child” in British *Vogue* in 2010.¹³ My doctoral research addressed this seeming contradiction, exploring the possible meanings of the “woman-child” in contemporary fashion magazines, focusing mainly on British *Vogue*, *i-D* and *Lula, girl of my dreams*.

As well as considering the meaning of childlike femininities I also wanted to find out the appeal these might hold for contemporary women. For as Ros Coward states in relation to 1990s fashion photography: “it is no use trying to pretend that these child-like supermodels simply pander to male fantasies of resuming control and are being imposed on a resentful womanhood” (Coward as cited in Jobling 1999: 123). My analysis of niche fashion magazine *Lula* supports this claim (Laing 2014a). *Lula* is a publication brimming with images of the “woman-child” that nostalgically transport the reader back to her or his childhood. Yet the term “infantilization” does not adequately explain what is going on here. “Infantilization” seems to suggest the subjugation of one group by another: the subjugation of women by men. By contrast, *Lula* is a publication produced predominantly by women, with a readership that is 92 percent female and just 8 percent male (White and Richardson 2013). This publication is therefore about

women producing images of childlike femininity for the consumption of other women. While earlier feminists such as Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir and Friedan conceptualized power as located in the hands of men and exercised against women, in light of publications like *Lula*, I needed to conceptualize childlike femininities from a poststructuralist perspective, as enmeshed in a network of shifting power relations (drawing from Michel Foucault 2002b and Judith Butler 2006, 2011). Drawing on the work of Butler also helped me theorize gender identity as intersectional, as discussed below.

Images of women “almost always display a complicated and bewitching tangle of new possibilities and old patterns of representation” (Bordo 2003: 131). The reader’s response is therefore key to understanding contemporary images, since “consistency in methods of constructing women does not imply consistency in response” (MacDonald 1995: 5). In other words, an image of the “woman-child” in the eighteenth century might be read quite differently from an image of the “woman-child” in 2015. As researcher, I could go some way in theorising both the meaning and appeal of these images through my own visual analysis and review of existing academic literature. However, given the puzzling resurgence of childlike femininities after three (or even four – Cochrane 2013) waves of feminism it seemed important to speak to women, in the social world, in order to find out how they made sense of the imagery.

For instance, I noticed that parodic versions of the woman-child were common, particularly from the 1990s onwards, appearing in the nineties guise of “Kinderwhore” (Arnold 1999): a figure re-signified in the millennial guise of Meadham Kirchhoff’s hyper-girliness (Figure 2, as discussed in Laing 2014b). Yet, as Judith Butler has argued, not all parodies will succeed in subverting gender norms. Instead, “parodic laughter, depends on a context and *reception* in which subversive confusions can be fostered” (Butler 2006: 189, emphasis added). In my own reception studies, I found that parodic versions of childlike femininity that I had initially labelled subversive – such as Meadham Kirchhoff’s SS2012 *A Wolf in Lamb’s Clothing* (Figure 2) – failed to be subversive in the eyes of my participants.¹⁴ Some participants read this style as a backlash against the gains of feminism: a regression to the “babydoll” femininities of the 1950s and 1960s. This interpretation falls in line with the backlash thesis proposed by Susan Faludi (1992). Thus, while there were instances where participant readings converged and overlapped with my own readings, there were other instances where they differed considerably, adding an additional layer to the meaning of an image and expanding the field of discursive enquiry.



Figure 2 Meadham Kirchhoff, *A Wolf in Lamb's Clothing*, SS2012.
Photographer: Victor Virgile

The Female Gaze as Multifarious

Having decided to conduct reception studies, I then needed to find an appropriate sociological method.

The value of focus groups for television-based audience studies is well established in Media Studies

(Bryman 2008: 475; Kitzinger 1994: 104) and I selected this format for my own reception studies (in line

with Malson et al 2011). Focus groups facilitated discussion and collaborative meaning-making, whilst

keeping moderator input to a minimum – allowing for rich and interesting data to unfold. I conducted six focus groups between 2012 and 2015, with a total of 20 female participants (names are anonymized). All participants were resident within the UK and aged between 16 and 58. In terms of ethnicity, 13 participants were White British; 3 were Asian British; 2 were Chinese; 1 was Black British; and 1 was White Scottish. Although participants were diverse in terms of age and ethnic background, there was less diversity in terms of social class (the majority were middle class) and sexual orientation (the majority self-identified as heterosexual). This has implications for the external validity of the data, as discussed below.

I opted for female-only reception studies because my research questions concerned the meaning of childlike femininities and their possible appeal to contemporary women. However, conducting audience research with women, only, has its shortfalls, in that it “[risks] reproducing static and essentialist conceptions of gender identity” (Ang and Hermes 1996: 110). Yet, I would argue nevertheless that giving “analytical priority”¹⁵ to gender in this way does not necessarily reify the category of “women” as fixed and biologically determined. Instead, following Butler, the important point is that the term “women” is used “tactically” and its exclusions “[taken] stock of” (Butler 2011: 5). In other words, in my research I took care to foreground the differences *between* women, rather than treating them as a homogenous group. Just as it makes sense to speak of “femininities” – in the plural – it also makes sense to speak of the “female gaze” as plural rather than singular. For, as Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (1988: 7) put it, theorizing the “female gaze” through the lens of gender alone is done “at the expense of theorising the subject in terms of class, race, generation – or feminism” (7).

In reception studies of the “woman-child” I found that gender did appear, in some instances, to structure participants’ readings.¹⁶ However, supporting the point made by Gamman and Marshment (1988), there were also moments where participants made reflexive reference to their own ethnicity when discussing the images of women before them. For instance, in reception studies of Marc Jacobs’ *Oh, Lola!* (2011, Figure 1), which features actress Dakota Fanning, Shanaz (36), of Bangladeshi origin, stated:

And even as an Asian person , I don’t, wouldn’t recognise an Asian [inaudible] an Asian modelling for them, I’d be like “Oh, what’s that? That’s a bit... strange”. Whereas if it was someone white I’d think “Oh, that looks nice! That looks normal”.

This statement was met with agreement by two other participants, one of whom was black British and the other who was of Bangladeshi origin. This demonstrates the extent to which whiteness in the fashion media has been internalised as the “norm” by these women, making other ethnicities appear “strange” or out of place. This supports the argument that the power relations that work to marginalise social groups, such as the politics of race, will inevitably feed into practices of looking, as bell hooks (1992) and Jacqui Roach and Petal Felix (1988) have noted.

Focus Group Method

In focus groups I showed participants six double-page images. I selected images that were somewhat representative of the key themes that had recurred in the images I collected from fashion magazines (I collected nearly 2000 in total, storing them using a Filemaker Pro database). I showed images to respondents in a staggered manner, one after another. Where possible, I kept the images in their original “media context” (Walker 1997: 57), given context as an “important determinant of photographic meaning” (54).¹⁷ This was possible where I owned the magazine from which the image derived (as was the case with Figure 1), but where I did not, I relied on high quality photocopies – in colour and to scale – of the double-page spreads in question. Where I presented participants with the magazine as a whole, they tended only to flick through it briefly, before quickly returning to the image under discussion. So, in practice, it made little difference whether I presented the image in its original context (the magazine), or colour photocopy of the double-page in question.

In the name of experimentation, I adopted a different approach in my final focus group. Instead of leaving the magazine on the table for participants to flick through I, myself, slowly flicked through the fashion spread in question – “White Nights” photographed by Tim Walker in British *Vogue* (January 2007: 84-109) – allowing time for participants to make comments, and stopping at images that seemed to interest them. This approach worked well and was a fruitful way of presenting editorial spreads, which often carry a narrative, to participants. I would argue for the value of holding reception studies at different points in the research process, rather than conducting them in one block. Different images emerged as significant at different moments in my research, and the two additional images I showed to my final focus group (conducted in 2015, three years after my other 5 focus groups) led to readings that differed significantly from my own, thus challenging the theoretical conclusions I had reached.

My reception studies guide went through various modifications as my social research progressed (in line with Rubin and Rubin 2005). These were mostly minor, and pertained to tweaking the wording of

questions in line with those which best facilitated discussion, without requiring further explanation. The final guide was as follows:

1. What comes to mind when you look at this image?
2. What sort of feeling or atmosphere does the image have?
3. Would you be friends with this woman?
4. Do you see yourself as similar to this woman?
5. Do you know any women who look like this?
6. What would you think if a man was shown in the same way?¹⁸
7. Overall, do you like or dislike the image?

I also posed follow up questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their readings and thoughts.

Meaning-making in focus groups is collaborative and it therefore makes sense to reflect the interactive character of the discussion when writing up findings (Kitzinger 1994: 104; Wilkinson 1999: 236). Quoting generously from transcripts is one way of achieving this as well as helping to support key points (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 78) and giving the reader the opportunity to “reconstruct alternative meanings” based on the dialogue cited (Hermes 1995: 6). As can be seen from the excerpts below, in quoting from focus group transcripts, I presented dialogue between participants in a way that “[preserved] some of the messiness of talk” (Devault 1990: 109): such as “you know”, “kinda”, “it seems”, and the near-ubiquitous “like”. Devault suggests that the “standard practice” of smoothing over less well-articulated pronouncements is “one way that women’s words are distorted; it is often a way of discounting and ignoring those parts of women’s experience that are not easily expressed” (1990: 107).¹⁹ Furthermore, in my reception studies I found that the moments where participants struggled to articulate their thoughts in relation to images seemed to signal something unspeakable or subjectivities that were “unintelligible” or non-normative (as per Butler 2006) – such as an image of two women in partial embrace.²⁰

The findings collated from my reception studies can be understood as a set of “contingent truths”, meaning “truth that seems to hold at a particular time under specified circumstances” (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 24-5). While not generalizable to a broader population (Wilkinson 1999: 237), “contingent truths” nevertheless serve an exploratory purpose: in my case helping evaluate my own conclusions, rooted in theory and visual analysis, as to the possible meanings and appeal of childlike femininities in fashion photography. In fact it would be inconsistent with the Foucauldian principle of discourse, “to

contend that the analyst's own discourse was itself wholly objective, factual or generally true" (Tonkiss 1998: 259). In discourse analysis Tonkiss suggests that one should aim for "internal validity" (259). This involves aiming for "coherence and consistency" as well as supporting arguments with adequate data garnered from discourse analysis (259). The resulting study should be critically "persuasive" and offer "insightful, useful and critical interpretation of a research problem" (259). In my case, this was to reach a better understanding of the meaning and appeal of childlike femininities to contemporary women, following several waves of feminism.

My reception studies were experimental, both in purpose and in scope and as such inevitably have limitations. For instance, my group of participants cannot be considered representative of women as a whole within the UK, which has implications for what can be done with the resulting data. Secondly, my method was developed for the reception study of print media; the method would need to be adapted for the reception study of digital fashion media, such as blogs, Tumblr, Instagram and fashion film. Moreover, I focus on images and their reception only. This is not to undermine the importance of studying production as a site at which meaning is made but stems instead from the need to draw parameters around an ever-expanding research project.

Finding a Theoretical Framework

The various strands of my visual methodology were united through Michel Foucault's (2002b [1969]) concept of discourse: an inclusive concept that encompasses the images themselves, the magazine copy, and the words of my participants. Like the images I had collected, I considered participants' words to be statements within discourse: statements which stem from and contribute to longstanding discourses on women and fashion. Writing about talk and narrative, Iris Marion Young (1990: 12) states: "The discourse we use when we describe our experience is no more direct and unmediated than any other discourse; it is only discourse in a different mode". A difference does consist, however, in the vitality of verbal narrative as a mode of discourse: "It is alive and active as a cultural force, not just as a kind of literature. It constitutes a major reservoir of the cultural baggage that enables us to make meaning out of a chaotic world and the incomprehensible events taking place in it" (Bal 2002: 10). In my own study I found that participants' comments breathed life into the images, as did the joking and reflections that stemmed from them.

Showing images to groups of women therefore activated their own sets of “cultural baggage”, some of which they voiced in order to make sense of the images before them. I understood participants to articulate their responses through the “discursive resources” (Malson et al. 2011) available to them. For instance, Malson et al. discussed familiarity with feminist discourse as a kind of critical resource participants brought to bear on the media imagery before them. Curran similarly stresses that one’s ability to critique media imagery might relate to the “variable degree of social access to ideas and meanings which facilitate contrary ‘readings’ of the media” (Curran 1996b: 294). In my own reception studies I found discursive resources to vary between the focus groups: the arts students from China (in their twenties) had proverbs I did not know, while the group of white British women aged 41-58 had media references I was not familiar with, such as television adverts for Cadbury’s Flake in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s. Some women made sense of images through their own memories of childhood, which were then relayed through the mythologizing lens of “Romantic childhood” (Higonnet 1998). Images, then, are not perceived in any objective fashion, but are instead filtered through one’s past experiences and knowledge. This might be considered the “thinking eye” which “[adds] something to the photograph” (Barthes 2000 [1980]: 45).

As well as theorising participants’ comments, I also required a theoretical framework for the concept of gender itself, since I was dealing with images of femininity. I adopted Judith Butler’s (2006, 2011) concept of “discursive performativity” in order to link normative discourses to the sexing and gendering of social subjects. Gender, by this tack, consists not in some immutable essence but instead involves performative repetitions which “[congeal] within a highly rigid regulatory frame [...] to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 2006: 45). “Discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make” (Butler 2011: 70). Given the primacy of the visual in contemporary western societies, there exists a crucial link between looking, knowing, and being/becoming. This is evident in “the pervasiveness of sight metaphors about knowledge: seeing is believing, I see what you mean, as far as I can see”, and so on (Dyer 1993: 103). It follows, then, that looking should play a key role in gender performativity; practices of looking are one way in which the “outside” (discourse) gets inside.

Sylvia Pritsch (2004) has explored the central role played by images in Foucauldian technologies of the self. Of particular note for Pritsch, is Probyn’s citation of Le Doeuff: “images ‘are not, properly speaking, “what I think”, but rather “what I think with” or again “that by which what I think is able to

define itself”” (Le Doeuff as cited in Probyn 1993: 91). Commenting on this passage, Pritsch (2004: 127) notes the “self-reflexive” quality of discursive images that become “points of view” within the subject’s mind and as such hold potential for re-configuration. Interestingly, Pritsch points to the openness of Le Doeuff’s concept in that “no distinction is made between ‘concept’, ‘sign’, or ‘metaphor’” (Pritsch 2004: 139 note 9). This openness makes sense, in a way, because images on the page, in the process of being read, become mental images that inform one’s understandings of the world, long after the magazine has been put down. Given that fashion photography has been termed “the dominant currency of female imagery” (Brookes 1992: 19) the repetitive reiteration of feminine ideals such as the “woman-child” works to delimit the visual field of available images through which women are able to “think themselves” into being. Images are thus vested with great power to reproduce oppressive norms of femininity whilst also “[offering] possibilities for refiguring” (Pritsch 2004: 136). They hold the potential for re-imagining or at least shifting – however slightly – definitions and visions of what it means to be a man or a woman at a particular moment, in a particular place.



Figure 3 “Sugar ‘n’ Spite”, *i-D*, no.143, August 1995: 70-1. Photographers: Davies and Davies. Models: members of girl band Fluffy

In this way, it makes sense to talk of images being “read” by participants. This is a useful term because it denotes “not only the capacity to identify and decode²¹ a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs” (Terni cited in Hall 1992: 135). The discursive resources participants brought to bear on imagery proved particularly illuminating in relation to “Sugar ‘n’ Spite” (Figure 3): a feature on the British girl-band “Fluffy”, active in the 1990s (*i-D* no.143, August 1995: 70-71). In my own visual analysis, I read these women through discourses on 1990s Kinderwhore and grunge (Arnold 1999). My own reading differed considerably from those in reception studies with four white British women, aged between 41 and 58, resident in rural Scotland. These women are not the target demographic for *i-D*, which might explain, in part, the dialogue that ensued upon presentation of “Sugar ‘n’ Spite”:

Excerpt I

- Smithy: Drugs abuse. Sex abuse.
- Morna: It’s from the nineties; I think it’s ‘94... It appeared in *i-D* magazine, which is, like, a *style* magazine.
- Smithy: Too many girls on [inaudible]. The *hollow eyes*.
- Jean: mmmhmm
- Smithy: There’s something *haunted* about those.
- Jean: Emm... what’s her name... the mass mur, moors murderer?
- Katherine: Oh yes!
- Smithy: Myra Hindley.
- Jean: Myra Hindley.
[laughter]
- Katherine: Oh yeah!
- Jean: Her *eyes*.
[...]
- Smithy: And Rosemary West is another one that...
- Jean: Mmhmm
- Morna: Mmm
- Jean: There’s something slightly *unhinged*...

So within a couple of minutes, the participants had already situated the image in the context of drug abuse, sex abuse, mental instability – as indicated by the word “unhinged” – and the mass murder of children. Given the abhorrence of Hindley’s crime, it is worth considering why members of girl-band

Fluffy might come to be read through the tropes of one of the most vilified female figures in twentieth-century Britain.

According to Birch, the photograph of Myra Hindley taken at the time of her arrest, in 1965, has become “synonymous with the idea of feminine evil” (Birch 1993: 32). The photograph came to symbolise “the threat of femininity unleashed from its traditional bonds of goodness, tenderness, nurturance. It strikes at the heart of our fears about unruly women, about criminality, and about the way gender is constructed” (32). As the focus group progressed, participants drew upon additional references, such as monstrous “baby” figures from *Toy Story*, *The Bride of Chucky*, and broken china dolls. Collectively, these intertextual references portray the women depicted as callous, depraved, terror-inducing and quite literally broken. These readings of Fluffy tie in with Evans’ comments on the depiction of women in 1990s fashion and film more generally. Fluffy’s flirtation with grunge is reminiscent of de Beauvoir’s observation that “If... woman evades the rules of society, she returns to nature and to the demon” (de Beauvoir as cited in Evans 2003: 127). Thus, through a very slight shift in the visual language of femininity – the direct gaze, the tilted head, a hand near the crotch, the dark make-up – the girls in the image provoked a response that located them in the realm of mass child murder and grotesque babies-turned bad.

The participants in Excerpt I were unlikely to be familiar with the visual codes of *i-D* and as such may not have read the images with the irony intended.²² This is reinforced by readings from a separate reception study I conducted with two Chinese students in their twenties, both studying for Masters degrees at Central Saint Martins. Although one participant, Yves, expressed the sense that “in reality, usually we’d think that they were problematic girls”, the other participant, Zoe, nevertheless expressed admiration for one of the girls, stating “I still really wanna be like that”, perhaps tying in with the fascinated looking that can occur between women, as discussed by Jackie Stacey (1988). The following exchange then ensued:

Excerpt II

- Yves: She can identify herself. She’s like ‘I’m this.’ What else. She *knows* everything. That kind of feeling. Like...
- Morna: So she knows who she is?
- Yves: Yeah, yeah and she knows what she’s doing and she’s quite cool about it.
- Zoe: And she’s cool about anything else. And this one, too, I think they’re

really confident, in a way, like, yeah.

This positive reading of “Fluffy” might be explained in terms of the participants’ familiarity with the codes of fashion or style magazines – their “fashion capital” (Lynge-Jorlén 2009: 50) or “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1996) – particularly given their age (in their twenties), and their position as arts students at Central Saint Martins in London.

Investments in Fashion Photography

Alongside the concept of “discursive resources”, I also found the concept of “investment” a fruitful way of unpacking participant readings. Building upon the work of Henriques et al., Ang and Hermes (1996: 120) define investment as “an emotional commitment, involved in the taking up of certain subject positions by concrete subjects”. Investments might be multiple, conflicting or contradictory. Furthermore, investment might involve having “an – often unconscious – stake in identifying with certain subject positions, including gender positions” (120). According to Ang and Hermes, this notion builds upon and “gives some depth” (120) to Stuart Hall’s notion of “negotiation” (see below).

In my own study I found that women had a range of different investments in the “woman-child”: nostalgia for childhood (Laing 2014a); curiosity; intrigue; fascination; empowerment; comfort; aspiration; escape; identification with sadness; feminist critique; and so forth. Through reception studies I was able to “test out” theory on spectatorship – such as the idea of the “internalised male gaze” (Berger 2008 [1972]; Mulvey 2009 [1981]) – much of which is speculative in nature.²³ However, the mention of the unconscious in the quote above, reminds us that some investments simply cannot be articulated. While I could analyse the discursive statements of participants, there were inevitably ideas that participants chose not to articulate as well as a whole host of investments operating on an unconscious level, to which I did not have access – such as the idea of pre-oedipal longing, discussed by Fuss (1994), McRobbie (2009) and Radway (1991 [1984]). Furthermore, magazine reading is often a solitary pursuit and may involve practices of daydreaming, fantasy, free association, or abstract feelings, which simply cannot be articulated in words. As such we might consider Barthes (2000: 51) supposition that “What I can name cannot really prick me”. That is, where a person encounters “punctum” it may be difficult if not impossible to put into words. Transporting images from their normal reading context – whether that be reading in isolation or reading with friends – to the more critical context of a researcher-led focus group

inevitably effects a change in meaning, which must be acknowledged, but is difficult to avoid (Malson et al. 2011).

Polysemy not Pluralism

The above discussion clearly demonstrates how different women can make sense of the same images in radically different ways. The divergent readings of participants gave weight to the idea of polysemy as well as the active role of the reader in making sense of fashion images. Although it is never possible to de-centre the researcher entirely – given that all data is filtered through her interpretative lens – I nevertheless found value in the reception study method and its capacity to challenge my own theoretical conclusions about the prevalence and appeal of the “woman-child” in contemporary fashion photography. Introducing an element of reception served as a “control”, as Barthes puts it (1990 [1967]: 233): a means of interrogating the researcher’s visual analysis.

However, as Stuart Hall (1992) stresses, care should be taken not to equate polysemy with pluralism: “Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested” (134). Building on the work of Hall, David Morley (1992: 21) similarly warns against the “conception of media texts as equally ‘open’ to any and all interpretations [...] which readers wish to make of them”. Hall and Morley were writing in the context of television, but the same can be said of photography. In *The Photographic Message*, Barthes writes:

On the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation; while on the other, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is *read*, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs.
(Barthes 1977b [1961]: 19)

The presence of socio-cultural norms and codes means that conceptualising media texts as completely open overemphasises the agency of audiences, at the expense of recognising the power vested in ideological structures (media producers and institutions – themselves embedded in class-based structures – and the media messages disseminated by them). Hegemonic ideas, whether pertaining to neoliberal

capitalism or gender roles, will influence the production of cultural texts, their content, and their reception. David Morley has been particularly critical of the work of John Fiske²⁴ for “documenting the total absence of media influence in the semiotic democracy of postmodern pluralism” (Morley 1992: 24, in dialogue with the work of James Curran).

Numerous attempts have been made by scholars to reign in the concept of polysemy, and limit the extent to which texts are considered semiotically “open” (see for instance Curran 1996a, 1996b; Hall 1992; Morley 1980, 1992; Walker 1997). One influential attempt to draw parameters around the possible meanings of a text consists in Stuart Hall’s (1992) Encoding-Decoding model. This model works on the assumption that media texts have three modalities of meaning – producer/text/audience. When the message reaches the audience, Hall identifies three types of reading: *preferred* – in line with the meaning intended by producers; *negotiated* – where the preferred or “intended” meaning is recognized but adapted to one’s local situation; and *oppositional* – where the message is read through “some alternative frame of reference”, such as feminism or Marxism (Hall 1992: 137).

Compelling though it is, not least in its neatness, there are several difficulties with the Encoding-Decoding model, as Jackson et al. (2001) point out. The first issue is the “linear approach to production-content-readership” and the “conveyor belt” of meaning implied by this (19). This is problematic, not least 44 years on from the publication of Hall’s essay, where the digital world allows for interactivity and participation en masse. Then there is the difficulty of identifying particular “causal mechanisms” that structure an audience’s *preferred* reading (Evans and Gamman 1995: 45). Finally, when it comes to fashion photography, a multiplicity of creative agents are involved in the production of any given image, which makes for a range of competing desires and agendas. Martin Harrison suggests that fashion photographs, “at their most intelligent and compelling, operate at a level which may be beyond the requirements of those who commission them” (Harrison 1991: 14): something he later refers to as the photographer’s “hidden agenda” (68).²⁵ This multiplicity of producers poses a problem when it comes to establishing the intended or “preferred” meaning of any given photograph.

Yet whilst recognizing the shortfalls of the Encoding-Decoding model, the impetus behind it remains valid: that is, the desire to limit the range of possible readings of media texts.²⁶ In terms of my own reception studies, I needed to recognize the fashion image as open to more than one interpretation. However, I needed simultaneously to recognize the power vested in the fashion media to define and structure “truths” about what it means to be a woman in the West and the normative codes that might

influence participants' readings. I addressed these concerns, firstly, by recognizing the “structural anatomy” of the image (Barthes 1977b [1961]). For, as Gillian Rose (2007: 24) notes, there is a tendency in some audience studies to “pay little attention to the images themselves”. In my own visual analysis I elected, therefore, to be as clear as possible about the element(s) of the image that led me to a particular interpretation. This was also something I also encouraged participants to do – where possible – when they articulated a particular reading, feeling, or opinion in relation to an image. Secondly, Machor and Goldstein (2001) note that “though reception theorists critique foundational aesthetics, they do not assume that an interpretive community lacks normative ideals” (Machor and Goldstein 2001: 321). In terms of my own study, the concept of “discourse”, as the site where power and knowledge unite, proved fruitful in this regard in that I recognised participant responses as being structured by the “discursive resources” (Malson et al. 2011) available to them: themselves delimited by the field of cultural intelligibility.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the value of reception studies as a tool in the visual analysis of fashion photography. Despite the messiness entailed by reception studies, being a form of social research, I took heart in the writings of Alvesson and Sköldböck who write that “Interplay between philosophical ideas and empirical work marks high-quality social research” (2000: 7). While participant readings sometimes fell in line with my own, there were instances where they differed radically. These differences can be attributed to the different “discursive resources” possessed by participants as well as their different socio-cultural positionings. In this way, reception studies have the potential to push the field of discursive enquiry outwards, beyond the researcher's point of view, making for richer, more nuanced visual analysis.

The methodology I have outlined is experimental, both in purpose and in scope: not least because the reception of still (fashion) imagery remains under-theorised. It remains to be seen how mixed-gender or male-only groups would respond to representations of the “woman-child” in fashion photography. Furthermore, a study of the production side would yield further insight into the persistence of this ideal. Looking beyond this particular project, there is scope for far more scholarship on the reception of fashion media (and even fashion in its materiality). For instance, it would be interesting to see how the reception study method could be adapted for studies of new media, such as fashion film,

Instagram, blogs, and so on. More sustained attention to audience reception would provide a better sense of the role fashion media plays in the lives of people in the social world. This might avoid the scenario whereby “the study of cultural representations alone, divorced from consideration of their relation to the practical lives of bodies, can obscure and mislead” (Bordo 2003: 183). Or, as Pritsch (2004: 131) frames it: “the crucial question [...] is how to get from image to social reality” – and vice versa.

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¹ See Milner and Browitt (2002).

² In this passage from *The Fashion System* (1990 [1967]), Barthes makes a curious distinction between ‘reading’ and ‘reception’: “we cannot ‘prove’ the rhetorical signified by direct recourse to the mass of its users, since this mass does not *read* the message of connotation but rather *receives it*.” (233). In an earlier essay, however, when discussing the press photograph he refers to this medium being ‘read’: “[the] photograph is not only perceived, received, it is *read*, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs” (Barthes 1977b [1961]: 19). It is unclear why Barthes finds the term “read” appropriate in the latter case but not the former.

³ Recent publications on methodology for Fashion Studies include: Flynn and Foster (2009); Granata (2012); Jenss (2016); Kawamura (2011).

⁴ This is a model also advocated by Gillian Rose in her text *Visual Methodologies* (2007). Stuart Hall’s (1992 [1973]) influential Encoding/Decoding model of media communication works on this assumption, as explored later in this article.

⁵ Discourse analysis does allow one to go beyond the boundaries of the image, in that the researcher’s analysis aims to locate the image in longstanding discourses on femininity, for instance (see Rocamora 2009: 54-62 for discussion).

⁶ One reason for the small number of studies on the production side pertains to the difficulties encountered by researchers when attempting to gain access to producers. Ane Lynge-Jórten (2009: 40) discusses this issue, noting that she was able to gain “behind the scenes” access at because “The producers already knew me, and at the time of fieldwork I was already ‘inside’ the field working as a freelance contributor to the magazine as a writer” (46).

⁷ On the production side see Entwistle and Wissinger 2012; Ferguson 1983; Lynge-Jórten 2009; Oliver 2010. For studies on the site of reception see Benwell 2008; Crane 2000; Hermes 1995; Malson et al. 2001.

⁸ *Gogglebox* was first aired in 2013 and there have been 9 series to date (Channel Four 2017).

⁹ For a historical overview of the development of reception studies in Cultural Studies see Machor and Goldstein (2001: 203-212)

¹⁰ Crane (2000), herself, does not appear to use the term “reception studies” but her method arguably falls within the ambit of this approach in that she states: “The goal of this study is to examine responses to representations of gender in fashion photographs and clothing advertisements among young and middle-aged women, representing diverse ethnicities and nationalities” (212).

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- ¹¹ Their reception studies built upon the earlier visual analysis of Rosalind Gill (2008).
- ¹² Although see Bordo (2003) and Malson (1998) for discussion of anorexia, thinness and fashion.
- ¹³ Prior to 2010 the average number of images of childlike femininities I collected in British Vogue was 51.4 per year (in the period 1990-2009). By contrast, in 2010 I collected 130 images: far more than I had collected in any year prior to this.
- ¹⁴ I showed participants a feature from British *Vogue* entitled “Power of TWO” (January 2012: 140-1). This was a feature where the designers, and a group of models, re-enacted a Slutwalk on the streets of Dalston in London. The representation of women in this feature was problematic, particularly in terms of “race”, but I am unable to explore the content of the image more fully here due to the constraints of space and the priority given to methodological discussion in this article.
- ¹⁵ The phrase “analytical priority” is borrowed from David Morley (1992: 12), who uses it to explain the foregrounding of social class in his study of television.
- ¹⁶ Unfortunately I lack the space to explore these instances here.
- ¹⁷ See also: Evans and Thornton (1989: 82); Harrison (1991: 14-15); Jobling (2001).
- ¹⁸ I devised this question with Pollock’s (1987) notion of “gender reversal” in mind.
- ¹⁹ That said, there were occasional instances, particularly with younger participants, where the abundance of “you knows”, “likes” and “emms” made the quoted text very difficult to follow. In these instances I edited out some of these, particularly where there were several of these in a row (such as ‘kind of’).
- ²⁰ The image appeared as part of “Heavenly Creatures”, a photo spread in British *Vogue*, March 2006: 308-321. Photographer: Benjamin Alexander Huseby). My textual analysis of this image can be found in Laing (2012).
- ²¹ The term “decoding” is somewhat problematic, as discussed below vis-à-vis Stuart Hall’s Encoding-Decoding model.
- ²² Irony and playfulness are evident in the title of the feature, “Sugar ‘n’ Spite”. This is a tongue-in-cheek reference to an English nursery rhyme proclaiming little boys to be made of “snips and snails, and puppy dogs’ tails” whereas little girls are made of “sugar and spice and all things nice”.
- ²³ The constraints of space mean I am unable to present these findings here. They are, however, presented in my Ph.D. thesis, from which this article derives.
- ²⁴ At this point in his argument Morley is referring to Fiske, J. (1987) “British Cultural Studies and Television” in Allen, R. (ed.) *Channels of Discourse*. London: Methuen.

²⁵ Harrison makes this point in relation to Richard Avedon, whom he saw as interested in exploring human psychology through fashion photography.

²⁶ Hall's model was taken up by David Morley (1980: 10) in his *Nationwide* audience studies, under the heading "structured polysemy". In a later essay, Morley (1992) maintained that the Encoding-Decoding model "while needing development and amendment in various respects, still offers the best alternative to a conception of media texts as equally 'open' to any and all interpretations [...] which readers wish to make of them" (21).